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Surviving a Kidnapping in Chechnya

skyisalwaysthere.jpg

In 1997, [Camilla Carr](http://www.camillacarr.org/) and [Jonathan James](http://www.camillacarr.org/) were kidnapped and held for fourteen months (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/180973.stm) in Chechnya. Speaking neither Russian nor Chechen, armed with good intentions and a car full of toys, the two Britons had volunteered to help traumatised children in [Grozny](https://www.time.com/time/daily/special/photo/grozny/). They were soon kidnapped, and this book – [The Sky is Always There: Surviving a Kidnapping in Chechnya](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Sky-Always-There-Surviving-Kidnapping/dp/1853118567) – is a ghastly tale of casual violence and the kidnappers' contempt for their hostages.

Many who travelled to Chechnya at this time got into trouble. A tough and resourceful Russian woman journalist I knew also worked with children in Grozny.

Galya thought she knew what she was doing, but the Chechen man she most trusted betrayed her and she was taken captive. After her release, she fostered half a dozen Chechen children in her tiny flat in Moscow. She did not return to Chechnya.

Around the same time the authors and Galya were seized, I was held under armed guard while attempting to track down [President Dzhokhar Dudayev](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dzhokhar_Dudayev) in hiding. Luckily, one bearded fighter recognised me from an afternoon when we had sheltered from shellfire together. The atmosphere lightened, and we were sent on our way to Dudayev. Afterwards, I too stopped working in Chechnya.

So how did the woefully unprepared Jon and Camilla think they would get away with it? Unable to talk to their captors, the couple were reduced to making sense of their situation in their own terms. They deployed healing visualisations, yogic breathing exercises and a strategy of appeasement. They even gave the gunmen massages. One captor raped Camilla many times over a prolonged period, with Jon listening in the next room. Eventually, she made it clear that the experience was terrible. The rapist claimed to be surprised, as he ostensibly thought that western women enjoyed rape. Camilla wondered whether she should have registered her objection sooner. The couple did not ask to be kidnapped, abused and raped, but the lesson is that people should think about the risk of going into an environment already known for the likelihood of kidnapping.

This is a car crash of a book, a how-not-to essay in on working in a war zone. Much of the time, one wants to shake the authors and ask them what they thought they were doing. Jon's dreadlocks, their massages and Camilla's clumsy confusion of eating and toilet utensils which so appalled their captors leave the impression that the authors didn't do their homework. Apparently, they were arrogant enough to think they didn't have to.

Reviewer: [Richard Pendry](https://www.linkedin.com/pub/6/a4b/b31) is a lecturer in broadcast journalism at the [University of Kent](http://www.kent.ac.uk/journalism/staff.html). He reported from all over the former Soviet Union, including Chechnya, for [Frontline News](http://www.ricenpeas.com/docs/vinterciew.html) in the 1990s. [The Sky is Always There: Surviving a Kidnapping in Chechnya](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Sky-Always-There-Surviving-Kidnapping/dp/1853118567) by [Camilla Carr](http://www.camillacarr.org/) and [Jonathan James](http://www.camillacarr.org/)

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